

Chapter 23

Father Regrets Past Indulgence

Secretary Kang Conducts a Special Examination

“You’ve brought down the whole family!”

Father was furious, his face flushed, his voice hoarse.

“I’m being investigated! Me—an old revolutionary, forty years in the army! I have to go in front of a commission and explain myself! Heaven only knows what kind of trouble your brother is in. How could you do this? Where’s the reason in it?”

“But I didn’t do *anything*,” wailed Margaret. “I’ve told you, I didn’t do *anything*! Military secrets? I don’t even know what they’re *talking* about!”

“I’ve spoilt you.” Father was shaking his head, intent on his own logic. “That’s what it is, I’ve spoilt you. No discipline! You always had everything you wanted, never tasted bitterness. Now you want to make some connection with this damn foreigner, fuck his mother, so you destroy your family.”

“How was I to know he was a spy? I couldn’t know that, could I? I thought he was just lonely. I thought he just wanted to be friends.”

“Of course he’s a spy! All foreigners are spies! Why else would a foreigner come and work here, if not to steal our national secrets? Don’t you know how much higher the standard of living is in the west? He could earn more in a month in his own country than he made in a year in China. There’s bound to be some ulterior motive. All that stuff they found

in his room. Troop dispositions, command structures, casualty counts from the Vietnam expedition. He'd been collecting it for months."

"But where did he get it? Where did he get it? Not from me—I don't know anything about these things."

"Of course you don't. But they knew he was spying, they found the evidence, and just at that time you chose to be caught spending time with him, alone. You!—your father a Major-General, your brother in Military Intelligence. What are they going to think?"

"I didn't do anything wrong! I was just being friendly, that's all." Margaret felt herself blushing, though she had spoken nothing but the truth. That Mr Powell had kissed her—she could hardly be blamed for that. It wasn't something she had incited him to. No, she had done nothing wrong. Yet now she was being treated like a criminal: held incommunicado at the Conservatory for three days, being interrogated all the time, released at last into her parents' custody, to discover that Father himself was under investigation. Public Security had found all kinds of incriminating documents in Powell's private room, Father told her. He was a spy for the British government.

"But how could I know that? How could I know that? I was just being friendly." This had been her single line of defense during interrogation. She thought at last they had believed her, having extracted from her all the truth she contained, including Powell's having kissed her. Surely once they heard her tell that, they must have known she was being open with them.

The phrase Father used again and again was *make a big matter into a small matter*. That was what you had to do in these situations: *make a big matter into a small matter*.

"Just tell the truth," he had been saying these days past, when he wasn't cursing at her. "Tell the truth and don't contradict yourself. They're bound to find out sooner or later where the secrets came from. Tell the truth, but play everything down. Criticize yourself, flatter the leaders. Make a big matter into a small matter."

Margaret thought of going to find Baoyu's father, who was a senior official in the Public Security Bureau. Perhaps he would be able to help her. Baoyu himself was in Copenhagen with the Royal Danish Ballet, but

no doubt they could get in touch with him. She was under *de facto* house arrest, but after some days of pleading she persuaded Mother to go to the place where Baoyu's family lived. They were not there; they had gone to the seaside resort of Beidaihe for the summer.

Of all her classmates and teachers, only Johnny Liu came to see her. She did not blame the teachers. A teaching position in the Beijing Music Conservatory was a great prize for oneself and one's family, not to be jeopardized by fraternization with putative enemies of the people. A similar consideration applied to the classmates, of course; but they did not have wives and children to worry about, and had not had their careers already derailed once by the Cultural Revolution, as most of the teachers had. She thought one or two of them, one or two Margaret had thought of as close friends, might have been bold enough to come calling. But only Johnny Liu came.

She was at home with Mother when he came. Father was still being investigated in connection with her case, and had to go here and there to answer questions, sometimes for two or three days at a time. Mother let Johnny Liu in and called Margaret from her bedroom, where she was reading a novel. When she saw Johnny Liu she burst into tears. Seeing him, all the happy years at the Conservatory came back—and the knowledge that it had all been for nothing, all been lost; that without (so far as she could see) doing anything very wrong, she had lost everything. Seeing her distress, Johnny Liu himself seemed close to tears.

“Little Sister. I came to see if you're all right.”

For a while Margaret could not speak. She sat on the sofa with Johnny Liu, sobbing while he held her hand. At last: “I guess the classmates are all talking about me.”

Johnny Liu laughed. “Classmates? The whole *city's* talking about you! The whole *world!* It's an international incident!”

“Really?” Margaret was impressed despite herself. “Oh, dear. Then I guess it's very serious.”

“Yes. Mr Powell was expelled from the country. The British Embassy made a protest to our Foreign Ministry.”

“Heaven! Such a big matter! Oh, I'm sure I shall be put in prison.”

“No, no.” Perhaps thinking he had over-alarmed her, Johnny Liu smiled encouragingly, and patted her hand. “It’s just a nine days wonder. Now Mr Powell’s been expelled, the fuss will soon die down.”

Johnny Liu glanced toward the kitchen, from where Mother could be heard making food-preparation noises, though the evening meal was still some hours off. “Let’s talk English, okay?”

“Yes. Oh, Johnny, it’s been so bad. Everybody thinks I gave secrets to Mr Powell. But I didn’t, I didn’t.”

“Of course you didn’t. I know that. All the classmates know it.”

“Do they? Nobody came to visit me.”

“They’re scared. Such a big case!”

“How about you, Johnny? You’re not scared?”

Johnny Liu laughed. “Pei! The communists destroyed my father, they destroyed my family. They can destroy me too—but they can’t make me *koutou* to them. I’ll never do that. They can beat me black and blue—I’ll spit in their faces. Anyway, I’ll be out of China in a few months.”

“Really? You got a position abroad?”

“Mm, not exactly. But my cousin in New York has booked me in to a college there.” Johnny Liu laughed again. “Just for one semester. Business college—but enough to get me a visa. Enough to get me out of China.” He laughed again.

“But Johnny, what about your singing?”

“Oh, I can find a job once I’m there. Even if I can’t sing, I can do something. I don’t really care. So long as I can get out of China. I’d rather polish shit in America than sing opera in China.”

“I wish I could go with you. Away from this . . .” Margaret could not think of a suitable English expression. “This stinking mess,” she said in Chinese.

Johnny Liu patted her hand. “Don’t worry. Nobody can believe you gave our country’s secrets to a foreigner. Anyway, all these secrets Mr Powell was supposed to have got. They don’t amount to much. I heard the details on BBC World Service. The names of some military leaders, some stuff about the fighting in Vietnam in ‘79—things everybody knows. I really don’t know why it’s such a big matter. There’s something fishy about the whole business.”

“You don’t think Mr Powell is really a spy?”

“Of course not! Who thinks so? Mr Powell? Ha ha ha ha!” From Johnny Liu’s mirth, it was clear he had never even entertained the possibility that the charges against Mr Powell might be true. Margaret felt very naive. Since the authorities, and even Father, had said Mr Powell was a spy, she had supposed it must be true.

“If he wasn’t a spy, why did they find military secrets in his room?”

“Ts! How difficult is it to put some papers in a foreign teacher’s room? Mr Powell only went to his room to sleep, he was in his office the rest of the time, or teaching. Anybody could have done it.”

“But why would anyone do that?”

“That’s a very interesting question. The authorities wanted to make Mr Powell look like a spy. Somebody wanted to do that. I don’t know why. If you hadn’t gone to his room alone that evening, you wouldn’t be involved. Why did you do that? If you wanted to say good-bye to him, why didn’t you ask me to go with you?”

“It wasn’t me wanted to say good-bye, it was Mr Powell.”

“Did he ask you to go?”

“Yes. He sent Samson Lü to ask me.”

Johnny Liu stared at her, narrowing his eyes. “Samson Lü.”

“Yes.”

“That creep?”

“Yes.”

Johnny Liu let go her hand and sat forward, on the edge of the sofa, elbows on knees, staring in front of him.

“What? Elder Brother, what?”

“Is your father involved in anything political? Any kind of struggle with other leaders?”

“No. His health hasn’t been very good. He’s given up a lot of his responsibilities. Says he’s moving back to the . . . second echelon.” (This last expression in Chinese—she didn’t know the English.) “Anyway, he was never political. Just a soldier, just concerned with military matters. Why do you ask that?”

“I was thinking about Samson Lü. Acting like that, like a go-between. What did Mr Powell think of him?”

“I think he liked him. Mr Powell didn’t know he was, what? What’s it called in English? When somebody’s an ankle-rubber.”

“‘Stool-pigeon’. Or you can say ‘informer’.”

“I don’t think Mr Powell knew. You know, foreigners never really understand what’s going on. But why did you ask about my father?”

“It’s only . . . I thought you got involved just by chance, when the authorities were aiming at Mr Powell. But maybe . . . I don’t know why, I don’t understand it, they were using Mr Powell to attack *you*.”

Now Margaret laughed. “Attack me? Why?”

“I don’t know. Because of your father, perhaps? To put him under suspicion?”

“I don’t think my father’s so important.”

“He’s more important than *you*. They’d hardly go to all that trouble to attack *you*, would they?” Johnny Liu laughed. “No, that’s not possible. Not possible at all! Why would anybody want to do that?”

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She was interrogated again—the same questions, the same answers. Alone in the apartment in the heavy August heat of Beijing, she wept and fretted. Father, far from accepting the situation, became more and more distant. He hardly spoke to her without anger. Mother seemed to think there really had been something fishy going on with Mr Powell, and dropped clumsy hints that if there was anything Margaret might be holding back, she had better get it off her chest, for the authorities would be bound to find out sooner or later. At the same time she was worried about Father’s health. There had been an episode early the previous year—a small heart attack, it seemed—after which the doctor had told Father to avoid stress and undue exertion. Now Mother fussed over him whenever he became agitated, glowering accusingly at Margaret the while.

At last Margaret ceased to care what happened. She only wanted things resolved, no matter how. The long interrogations, the eventless silences between, were too much to bear. And soon enough the resolution

came. She was to write out a full self-criticism; Father was to stand guarantor of her future good behavior; she was to accept an assignment as a middle-school language teacher in the far west of the country; and there was to be a special examination, to test her veracity on certain points.

Father seemed to think it was a good result. So far as her assignment was concerned, he seemed actually pleased. It would do her no harm, he said. Stay out there a year or two (he said), till everyone's forgotten about this miserable business. Then I'll pull some strings to get you back to the capital. A couple of years serving the people will do you a world of good. Make you realize what a nice easy life you've been having here.

Margaret longed to hear Father say some word of consolation to her, show her some of his old affection, or even just give some sign that he believed her side of the story; but he had set his face against her, retreated into some private obsession of parental doubt and guilt, and went off to his Divisional Headquarters for a week to catch up on work he'd missed while being investigated.

The special examination was to be done at a hospital in the Xuanwu district, not their local Peking Number Four. This apparently was by Secretary Kang's direction. He and the Party Secretary of this hospital were old comrades—Margaret overheard Father explaining this to Mother. Margaret was taken there on the appointed day by Mother, who was still unwilling to let her out alone.

The hospital was a shabby place, much inferior to the facilities she had got used to in West Wall District. Inside it was ill-lit, the air rancid and stifling. The original colors of the interior walls could still be made out: bottle green up to shoulder height, then white to the ceiling. The white had been stained to a mottled gray and brown by decades of dirty air, cigarette smoke and inattention. In the gloomy corridors and anterooms were crowds of rough-looking people, workers from the nearby factories perhaps, some moving listlessly from here to there carrying scraps of paper or glass tubes, most just standing, sitting or lying stretched out among the litter on the floor.

Mother made some inquiries. They were directed to a room half-way down a dark corridor. The workers shuffled aside to let them pass, staring

in their dull-witted way. The air stank of formaldehyde and humanity. Mother knocked on the door of the room.

“Come in.”

It was a tiny office. Sitting at an ancient wooden desk against one wall was a doctor. She was a woman of about fifty, ugly and sour-looking—what Johnny Liu would have called a Class Struggle Face. She wore a dirty white lab coat and skull cap.

“This is Han Yuezhu. From the Conservatory of Music. I’m her mother.” Mother’s voice was still sharp with resentment and anger. She had not spoken more than ten words directly to Margaret since Father had gone off to Divisional Headquarters. Margaret did not care any more. She was far gone in fatalism. She had even accepted her assignment to the far west, as at least a relief from Father’s anger, Mother’s accusing looks, and the relentlessly repetitive interrogations by Public Security. In lucid moments she knew that it was, of course, a disaster for her career, for her life—very little better than being sent to a Reform Through Labor camp. But most of the time she did not care. What had it been, anyway, all those plans for a singing career, but the facile whisperings of the demon Hope, deluding her again as so many times before, telling her that the future might be other than what it was implacably destined to be.

“What? Han What? Oh, yes. For the special examination.”

Margaret felt suddenly faint. *Special examination*. At this point, she actually had no idea what she was doing at the hospital. A suspicion, but no real understanding. It was something to do with her case, of course. With the belief everyone seemed to hold that in addition to the country’s secrets, she had also given Mr Powell more intimate favors. She knew that even Mother believed this, though she had made no direct mention of it, and Margaret had denied it to her a score of times, weeping as she spoke.

The woman had gone back to her writing. She scratched away for a full three minutes, while Margaret trembled and Mother stood silent and sullen.

“All right.” The doctor stood up. “You. Follow me.” She grabbed Margaret’s elbow and jerked her toward the door. To Mother: “You stay here, Comrade.”

They walked back down the corridor to the entrance lobby, then through the crowd of staring, murmuring workers to the opposite corridor.

A side corridor led off into the murky back part of the building. Here there were no windows, only twenty-five-watt bulbs in the high ceilings. The woman opened a door.

This was an examination room. It was quite surprisingly large, almost the size of one of the classrooms at the Conservatory. The only item of furniture was a vinyl examination table with tubular steel legs.

“Here,” said the doctor. “Wait.”

She left, closing the door behind her. Margaret was alone in the room. There was no window, only a ventilation grille, but the light here was much better than in the corridor. Margaret wandered back and forth for a while. The far left corner of the room, where the walls met the ceiling, had been attacked by damp and was swelling and flaking away in a great chancrous blister. The vinyl surface of the examination table was cracked, with black dirt in the cracks. Margaret waited. The bed, the formaldehyde smell, made her think of the Conservatory clinic. They had sent her there to spend the night after her interrogation. The muscular woman had gone with her—had not, in fact, taken her eyes from her. Especially when she undressed for bed. The woman had watched her so carefully! “If there’s something you want to tell me, just tell me,” the woman had said. “I’m a married woman. I know all those things. I know how it is with men. Sometimes they’re just like animals, they can’t control themselves.” At the time, Margaret hadn’t had a clue what she was talking about.

Perhaps half an hour passed. There were voices in the corridor: men’s voices, laughing. The door opened. The doctor came in first, followed by Secretary Kang, Branch Secretary Guo from the International Opera Department, and an uncouth character with a mustache whom Margaret recognized as one of the drivers from the Conservatory car pool. The last two were grinning at some joke, but Secretary Kang, when his glance fell on her, was cold-faced, as he was when he addressed the students on matters of discipline.

“This is the student?” asked the doctor.

“Ri-i-ight.” Secretary Kang breathed out the syllable. Behind him, the driver was lighting a cigarette.

“Do you want to attend the examination?”

“Yes. Let’s see what the foreigner got for his dollars.”

Branch Secretary Guo giggled. They were all well in the room now; but nobody had closed the door. Three or four other men had edged their way in, and were standing around the doorway. Margaret thought one of them was another Branch Secretary from the Conservatory, one who hung around with Branch Secretary Guo. The others she thought were just hospital workers.

“It’s not the right way to do it,” complained the doctor, who seemed to resent the whole business. “I myself should do the examination, then submit a written report. That’s the right way.”

“Fuck you, fuck your mother and fuck the right way,” remarked Secretary Kang in a flat, conversational tone of voice. “If you’ve got any issues, talk to your Secretary Niu upstairs. He knows me.” All the time he was looking at Margaret, still with that cold, dead look.

“Get your clothes off.”

So even was his gaze, so directionless his speech, that she did not grasp for a few seconds that this last remark was addressed to her.

“What’s the matter? You only undress for foreigners? Is that it? Your fellow-countrymen aren’t good enough for you?” The men behind him snickered. Margaret could not control her trembling. She thought she might pass out, and wished she could, but was too numb even for that. Reality—the room, the leering men, the doctor—seemed to recede. In a half-dream, she pulled at her clothes, laying them neatly at the far end of the table.

“Her skin’s so white!” said one of the men in the doorway.

“Ts!” said Secretary Kang. “If she were my daughter she’d have some bruises to show. I would have leathered the bitch. Teach her some morals.” He turned to spit on the floor. “All right, you. Get up on the table.”

Margaret lifted herself up to sit on the table. She did not quite make it at the first attempt from trembling so badly, and the doctor reached forward to steady her.

“Lie down, stupid. It’s not your fucking tonsils we’re going to examine.” Secretary Kang’s voice was full of contempt. The others all laughed.

Where the vinyl had cracked, the edges had curled up. They were sharp, and cut into her flesh. Margaret was horribly uncomfortable. She stared at the ceiling, forcing her mind blank.

“You don’t necessarily get a definite result from this examination,” said the doctor.

“What? What do you mean?” Secretary Kang seemed genuinely surprised.

“It’s a fact. Sometimes you can make a definite determination this way, sometimes you can make a definite determination that way. But often you can’t make any definite determination at all, either this way or that way.”

Secretary Kang stared at her a moment, then made a snorting sound. “That’s dogshit. Of course you can make a determination. Everybody knows these things.”

“No. Sometimes you just can’t tell.”

There was a moment of silence. Branch Secretary Guo broke it.

“In the old society they used a pigeon’s egg.”

“What? What the fuck are you talking about?”

“A pigeon’s egg. That’s how they used to tell. They’d take a pigeon’s egg and try to push it into the hole. If it wouldn’t go in, the woman was a virgin.”

This little gem of social history seemed to stun everyone to silence. At last one of the men at the door spoke.

“What if the egg broke?”

“Well, then there’d be a fine mess, wouldn’t there?” said Branch Secretary Guo.

Everybody laughed, everybody except Secretary Kang. He glowered at his colleague.

“Have you got a pigeon’s egg with you?”

“No. Of course not.”

“Well then SHUT THE FUCK UP!” He turned and stepped to the table. He grabbed Margaret’s bare knees and pushed them apart. “We don’t need any fucking experts here! These are things everybody knows!”

He stabbed forward with a meaty thumb. Margaret could not help herself: she screamed. Then, at last, she passed out.